TL 6632-3

Topic 351 FIRES GUTTING FORESTS IN E TIMOR
tapol reg.easttimor 3:52 pm Sep 27, 1993

Forest fires rage in East Timor

Source: Jakarta Post
Date: 22 September 1993
Dateline: Dili
Unabridged

Fire has destroyed thousands of hectares of forest in the province, an official said yesterday.

The forest fires, the worst in many years, have occurred in all of the province's 13 regencies, said chief of the local forestry office, Elias Enes Careres.

Dili townspeople can see conflagrations gutting forests on nearby hills almost every night.

He said the cause of the fires has yet to be established. He ruled out speculation that it was intentionally started by irresponsible people.

Topic 352 **Remarks on Timor Forest Fires**
apakabar reg.easttimor 3:47 pm Sep 27, 1993
(at access.digex.net)

From: "John A. MacDougall" <apakabar@access.digex.net>
Subject: Remarks on Timor Forest Fires

Forwarded by a list member who must necessarily remain anonymous. -- John

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What a surprise reading the message that fires occur accross the 13 districts inside East Timor. As I found difficult to confirm on this particular news, I can only say based on my experience of being a person who has grwon up inside East Timor in the past decades. I have been involved in a survey on this area when I was in East Timor.

In fact it's true that fires occur regularly in a certain part of East Timor, in the coastal areas, and in the hills (specifically in a certain hectare of land!!!) by local farmers with purpose of land clearance in the dry season_August through November_ every year.

No wonder one could see every single day at that time, fires and smokes occur frequently. In general local farmers (especially those who have traditionally engaged themselves in farming) have a classic method of farm by 'slush and burning' the grass to cultivate their crops.

As I understand it nowadays farmers are forced to move down to coastal areas or in the settlement areas leaving their property, land, etc in the mountains.

The conventional and easiest way of clearing the land is burning the grass which dried up during the dry season on their absence. All the grasses appeared "brown" and need to be wiped out. Consequently fires happened easily either deliberately or by coincidence by people passing thru the street/path throwing the used cigarettes towards the 'object'.

Therefore, during that season one could regularly see smoke or blazing occured in the hills, mountains, or in other farming areas. It's done due to shortage of manpower and time saving. That's the traditional way of land clearence as accounted by a Timorese to Carmel. I do agree on that.

Now, having read the last message that fires occur accross the 13 districts, one may doubt of its incidence. Without prejudice, I can only say that in the last couple of years since ABRI through its combat battalions operating in soutern coastal of East Timor such as Same, Suai, Viqueque and central region like Manatuto district which is 'arid region' fires ocurred regularly and deliberately done by ABRI personnel. The idea is to make life harder for the guerilla combatants in the bush during the dry season and facilitating ABRI's operation of clearence.

Putting no doubt that at the moment the Indnesian army is actively campaigning 'once for all' against the guerilla remnants in the bush, perhaps one could link this phenomenom with the past experiences. It's rather an unusual case if fires gutting the forest in all 13 districts (is this a joke ?), unless if this is a provincial programme implemented by 'Dinas Kehutanan Tk.I Propinsi Timor Timur'. However,the last is unlike as the head of Forestry Agency in Dili also regretted the incidence. So, I'm leaned to the opinion that if this is not done for 'pursuing' the guerillas, then what is the purpose of burning the whole forest ? Was it a regional program for farming ? I hope I'm wrong in my speculation, but that's the wind that I can provide at the moment.

Thank you. *** LENITO ***

Topic 347 **Re: Forest Fires**
kahn reg.easttimor 4:16 pm Oct 2, 1993
(at mathp7.jussieu.fr)

From: kahn@mathp7.jussieu.fr (Bruno Kahn)
Subject: Re: Forest Fires

We have at least two eyewitness testimonies of fires in East Timor. One is by Gabriel Defert, the author of Timor-Est, le Genocide Oublie. Here is an account dating back from his visit in August 1990:

"Currently certain army units have as a main mission to clean up the Timorese vegetation in order to avoid that a small group of armed men can escape patrols. More or less everywhere fires are lit in bushes and thickets, which has desastrous consequences on the ecolology of the island. Recall that the East Timorese climate is extremely dry and that vegetation is fragile there. So, after each provoqued fire, the only thing which will grow up again will be Imperata Cylindrica, very high dense and cutting grass, as impenetrable as noxious."

In an interview that I don't have at hand, he describes how he met military units armed with flame-throwers and obviously burning the vegetation.

The second eyewitness visited East Timor in August 1989, fall 1991 and August 1993. He also describes how the vegetation is obviously burned at several places.

Both have photos showing the quite impressive damage.